

Walking the Tightrope

Chapter 9

The Church is always faced with the twin influences
of maintaining doctrinal purity
while seeking to make its message understandable to others.

If we seek to cloister ourselves
from the world in some type of monastic existence
we will soon lose contact with the very people we have
been called to be a blessing to.

On the other hand,
we cannot so identify ourselves with the world
that our salt loses its saltiness
and we have no leavening influence on the lives of others.

In this essay we shall see that the world is a vast harvest field
that needs workers who can adapt both
the message and the methods so that
the work of redemption can go forward.

The Plentiful Harvest

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:35-38).

Jesus pictured the world as a vast harvest field. In the urban context of Los Angeles, there is an incredible diversity of “crops” which come to fruition at different times and require a particular method of harvesting. A diversity of crops demand a diversity of laborers, churches and methods working together in unity for the great final ingathering of the Kingdom.

An often subtle and undetected barrier to the harvest is the belief that is held by some that unity can only be maintained if uniformity is maintained in doctrine, practice and lifestyle. Marvin Moore comments:

Some people seem to be emotionally and intellectually incapable of acknowledging that such differences of opinion can be tolerated and still have a “good church.” As they see it, every issue is either black or white, and so clearly black and white that every Christian ought to be able to agree on which is which. . . . They cannot allow for a variety of views—what we call pluralism.¹

While Moore agrees that the essential teachings of Scripture needs to be understood and adhered to, “we should respect differences of opinion about less important matters, especially where there are no clear guidelines and it’s a matter of personal judgment what is right and wrong.”²

Adapting the Message

Could it be that constricting influences within the Seventh-day Adventist church has kept both individuals and congregations from exploring a diversified ministry? Some have felt that unity within the church could only be maintained through uniformity and see diversity as a threat to the church’s practices and teaching. Seventh-day Adventist writer Raymond Holmes comments on the historical conservative nature and unity within the church:

With numerical and economic power concentrated in North America, and with a basically conservative leadership, the Seventh-day Adventist church has maintained a remarkable unity in theology and lifestyle up to the present time. . . .

Now, however, a new era has arrived. The vast majority of Adventist believers live outside of Europe and North America. Consequently, numerical power (if not economic power) has shifted to the overseas Divisions, particularly Central and South America, Africa, and the Far East. Well taught by Adventist missionaries, these areas of Adventism still hold, by and large, to the full authority of the Bible and have not been significantly influenced by the historical-critical method of interpretation and by the liberalizing forces at work in Europe and North America.³

As Holmes has correctly pointed out, Adventist theology and lifestyle in the past were largely developed in a conservative, non-diverse context. These same black and white values were then transmitted to other third-world cultures, which for the most part were non-pluralistic as well.

However, because of increased communication, the global village no longer reflects just one but a multitude of cultures. The mosaic of peoples within large urban centers like Los Angeles, abundantly testifies to the rich diversity of world-wide movements of people. In the context of these vast changes, Holmes correctly sees the central issue at stake: “The critical question facing the Seventh-day Adventist church is whether it is prepared, at this stage of its history, to adopt a method of Bible interpretation conditioned by contemporary culture.”⁴

On the one hand Holmes is correct in sounding the warning of not allowing society to dilute the message of Scripture. Ellen White clearly sounds this warning:

At this time, when we are so near the end, shall we become so like the world in practice that men may look in vain to find God's denominated people? Shall any man sell our peculiar characteristics as God's chosen people for any advantage the world has to give? Shall the favor of those who transgress the law of God be looked upon as of great value? Shall those whom the Lord has named His people suppose that there is any power higher than the great I Am? Shall we endeavor to blot out the distinguishing points of faith that have made us Seventh-day Adventists?⁵

However, Holmes strongly rejects the idea that the context should have anything to do with how the message of Scripture is to be given:

The apostle Paul did not fashion his message to suit any particular social or age group. He preached the same message to the youth and to the elderly, to men and women, to the educated and uneducated. He didn't take a survey, analyze “felt needs” and adapt his message. Meeting real needs took precedence over meeting felt needs. Though Paul was “all things to all men,” he did not adapt his message. Paul would preach the same message to our generation that he preached to the upwardly mobile people of his time. Human need does not determine doctrine, divine revelation does.⁶

Although Holmes holds a high view of Scripture which is most commendable, he does not allow the full text of Scripture to influence his thinking. He quickly dismisses Paul's own testimony that he was "all things to all men" by stating that Paul did not adapt his message. However, in commenting on Paul's charge to Timothy, Ellen White underscores the importance of adapting the message to every individual:

Every one has his work. Paul said to Timothy, "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee." The ministers of Jesus Christ will have more than a mere casual interest for the people. They will seek to know the state of their spiritual being, even as a physician seeks to understand the physical difficulties of his patients. They will engage in personal conversation, and adapt their counsel to every individual case according to the need of the soul.⁷

Paul was but following the example of the Master Teacher, who when confronted with the lawyer's question regarding eternal life, "understood just how to adapt himself to the situation"⁸ And Christ's "messages of mercy were varied to suit His audience. He knew 'how to speak a word in season to him that is weary'; for grace was poured upon His lips, that He might convey to men in the most attractive way the treasures of truth."⁹

What Holmes seems to confuse here is the important difference between doctrines and a proper and necessary adaptation of the church's teaching to those who know them not. While the revealed doctrines of the Bible provide the unshakable foundation for a church's identity and teaching, these truths must be incarnated within the life of each community.

Adapting the Methods

Ellen White also urged the brethren to allow their method of labor needs to be influenced by the context: "You have a hard field to handle, but the gospel is the power of God. The classes of people you meet with decide for you the way in which the work should be handled."¹⁰ "Enter the large cities, and create an interest among the high and the low. Make it your work to preach the gospel to the poor, but do not stop there. Seek to reach the higher classes also. Study your location with a view to letting your light shine forth to others. This work should have been done long since."¹¹

While it is true that over-contextualization can lead to the perversion of God's Word, non-contextualization within a diverse urban area like Los Angeles would likely render the message ineffectual as well. Orlando E. Costas, in his book, *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization*, writes insightfully about how the very incarnation of Jesus teaches the importance of contextualization:

There cannot be evangelization without contextualization. The evangelistic task is always carried out under the assumption that the God who has spoken in Jesus Christ addresses each and every human being in his or her time and space. The gospel is not a generic message, although it has a universal and social dimension. It is a personal word of God for all and for each human being. The fact that the message has been embodied in Jesus as part and parcel of a particular social, cultural, and historical reality speaks for itself. The one who rose from the dead is proclaimed as Savior and Lord is Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean Jew, who was crucified. Thus the gospel was first proclaimed in the language and culture, in the space and time of a first-century Jew. . . . This is not a mere coincidence but the very intention of the God who sends good news of salvation to the world. This God communicates only in the vernacular and addresses persons and communities in the particularity of their sociocultural and historical situations.¹²

The second weakness in Holmes' argument is that he is not aware that we are all influenced by cultural bias. This is clearly demonstrated when he criticizes another writer:

Given his sociological premise, the author does not hesitate to say that "our understanding of Christ and Scripture is already conditioned by the culture and by the social position we occupy in society." That is the very problem that underlies the whole matter of biblical authority and interpretation. Too many people have allowed contemporary culture to condition their interpretations of the Bible.¹³

Although Holmes rightly sounds the warning that contemporary culture should not condition the foundational doctrines of the church, he shows a certain disregard that his viewpoints regarding some issues facing the church might also be conditioned by his own cultural background.

This is perhaps the same barrier the Holy Spirit had to overcome in Acts 15 with the Jerusalem Council. There was no doubt many in the church at Jerusalem could hardly conceive of Gentiles entering into the fellowship without being circumcised "according to the law of Moses."

However, the Spirit through the experiences of Peter and Paul had revealed that there was now to be a diversity in the church regarding the practice of circumcision. While the judgment of James and the council did not overtly prohibit the practice of circumcision in the home province, it did allow the Gentiles the freedom to legitimately enter the household of faith without being circumcised. On this issue, the mission of the church was not impeded by such diversity but was greatly blessed in its proclamation.

The New Testament church understood that: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The Lord’s Garden

Doctrine is never an end in itself, to be guarded like some vintage guitar that is never played in the real world. According to 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the primary function of doctrine is to enable us to become faithful and fruitful witnesses for the Lord. Doctrine is like the ground where plants grow. The richer the soil, the better the plants grow. And just as different plants will grow in different climates, there needs to be a diversity of ministry to bring about an abundant harvest. God has ordained that a diversity of gifts operate within congregations:

In all the Lord's arrangements, there is nothing more beautiful than His plan of giving to men and women a diversity of gifts. The church is His garden, adorned with a variety of trees, plants, and flowers. . . . From the endless variety of plants and flowers, we may learn an important lesson. All blossoms are not the same in form or color. Some possess healing virtues. Some are always fragrant. There are professing Christians who think it their duty to make every Christian like themselves. This is man's plan, not the plan of God. In the church of God there is room for characters as varied as are the flowers in a garden. In His spiritual garden there are many varieties of flowers.¹⁴

If diverse individuals have surrendered to the control of the Spirit, then the fruits of the Spirit will bring them together for united action:

The Lord desires His chosen servants to learn how to unite together in harmonious effort. It may seem to some that the contrast between their gifts and the gifts of a fellow laborer is too great to allow them to unite in harmonious effort; but when they remember that there are varied minds to be reached, and that some will reject the truth as it is presented by one laborer, only to open their hearts to God's truth as it is presented in a different manner by another laborer, they will hopefully endeavor to labor together in unity. Their talents, however diverse, may all be under the control of the same Spirit. In every word and act, kindness and love will be revealed; and as each worker fills his appointed place faithfully, the prayer of Christ for the unity of His followers will be answered, and the world will know that these are His disciples.¹⁵

Finally, the diversity of peoples in the city needs workers of different talents. Unity in diversity, not unity in uniformity is the key to successful ministry:

The workers in the large cities must act their several parts, making every effort to bring about the best results. They are to talk faith and to act in such a way as to impress the people. They are not to narrow the work down to their own particular ideas. In the past too much of this has been done by us as a people, and it has been a drawback to the success of the work. Let us remember that the Lord has different ways of working, that He has different workmen to whom He entrusts different gifts.¹⁶

Summary

Jesus pictured the world as a vast harvest field. In an urban context, there is an incredible diversity of crops which demand a diversity of laborers, churches and methods working together in unity for the great final ingathering of the Kingdom. An often subtle and undetected barrier to the harvest is the belief that unity can only be maintained if uniformity is maintained in doctrine, practice and lifestyle.

While the revealed doctrines of the Bible provide the unshakable foundation for a church's identity and teaching, these truths must be incarnated within the life of each community. The message and the methods of labor must be adapted in order to meet the needs of those around us. We have all been influenced by our culture and it is only through the molding agency of the Holy Spirit can both be true to Biblical principles and allow for differences on less important matters.

The Lord's spiritual garden is full of a wonderful variety of flowers, each with its own beauty, fragrance and ministry. May the Lord of the Harvest help us to discern the difference between the weeds and the plants of His own creation.

Endnotes

1. Marvin Moore, *The Gospel vs. Legalism*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1995) page 158.
2. Ibid., page 157.
3. Raymond Holmes, *The Tip of the Iceberg*, (Wakefield, MI: POINTER Publications, 1994), page 27.
4. Ibid., page 121.
5. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), page 121.
6. Raymond Holmes, "The Past President's Address '94,'" *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 5(2), page 7.
7. Ellen G. White, "Preach in Regions Beyond," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 11, 1902.
8. Ellen G. White, "Our Duty to the Poor and Afflicted," *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 01, 1895.
9. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), page 123.
10. Ibid., page 106.
11. Ibid., pages 74-75.
12. Costas, Orlando E., *Liberating News: A Theology of Contextual Evangelization*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), page 25.
13. Holmes, *The Tip of the Iceberg*, page 194.
14. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, pages 98-99.
15. Ibid., pages 99-100.
16. Ibid., page 100.